

How do regs affect you? Social scientists need to hear from crew and boat owners

WOODS HOLE, MA – Researchers with the Northeast Fisheries Science Center's Social Sciences Branch are in the final stage of a survey of crewmen – including hired captains – intended to help social scientists and, eventually, regulators, get a better grip on how fisheries management actions affect fishermen.

The "Survey on the Socio-Economic Aspects of Commercial Fishing Crew in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic" asks crewmembers for their views on fishing, fisheries management, and their day-to-day experiences, including their portside activities. It also asks for information on fishing expenses passed onto them through share or lay systems used to pay crew.

"We know next to nothing about crew, this critical part of the fishing community," said Tammy Murphy, an economist with the Social Sciences Branch. "This survey collects basic demographic, economic, and social data we do not have and that we need to understand what's going on in fishing communities."

The survey is being conducted on a one-on-one basis by interviewers from the Arlington, VA-based consulting firm QuanTech. By the time the survey ends in August, interviewers will have visited 15 ports in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic. As of early June, they had collected information from about 300 crewmembers.

In July, interviewers were canvassing the docks in Stonington, CT, Rockland, ME, Gloucester and Plymouth, MA, Cape May, NJ, Point Judith, RI, and Oriental, NC. In August, they are expected to finish up in Portland, ME and again in Cape May.

While most of the crew survey information is being collected on the dock, fishermen who want to participate

can arrange to be interviewed at other places or times by calling Murphy at (508) 495-2137 or Coleby Wilt at (805) 233-4128.

One thing is clear: Without hard data, the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) cannot begin to measure the socio-economic impact of fisheries management actions.

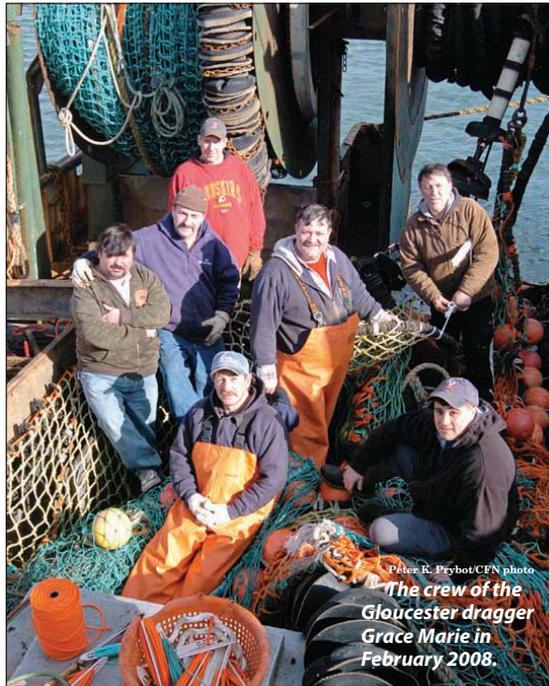
Owners' survey

A second effort titled "Survey of Socio-Economic Aspects of Commercial Fishing Vessel Owners in the Northeast and Mid-Atlantic" will begin in August targeting vessel owners.

Researchers have grouped vessel owners based on their landings and the permits they hold. About 800 will receive this socio-economic survey in the mail. The number of owners per fishery receiving the survey is based on the proportion of owners in each fishery to avoid over-representation of any single fishery, Murphy said.

"There is currently no way to track which fishermen have left and why, or what has happened to them," Murphy said.

Overall, industry members are aging, she noted, so it's possible that some owners are retiring earlier than planned due to fishery conditions or the opportunity to lease out their quota in some fisheries.



Peter K. Prybut/CFN photo
The crew of the Gloucester dragger Grace Marie in February 2008.

Both socio-economic surveys of crew and owners are asking fishermen whether they have considered leaving fishing and whether they would advise a young person to enter the fishing industry.

Murphy said responses to those two questions from the crew surveys sums up their outlook on fishing.

When asked, "Would you advise a young person to go into commercial fishing?" almost everyone Murphy spoke with answered "no."

To the question, "If you had to live your life over again, would you become a commercial fisherman?" Murphy said, "They answer 'yes.'"

Both the crew and owner socio-economic surveys will be repeated in coming years to document changes over time.

Social Sciences Branch researchers also are conducting two other surveys. One is a "social capital survey," which aims to understand the new relationships among permit holders working in groundfish sectors.

The other is an annual cost survey, which was sent out to 1,874 vessel owners in May. As of July 10, researchers had received 334 completed

annual cost surveys – nearly 20% of the number sent out. Responses continue to roll in, however, and Murphy encouraged those who have not yet done so to complete and return the survey.

All of these surveys are intended to identify the full extent of impacts of fisheries management decisions so regulators can understand the consequences of their actions on the people in the fisheries.

The surveys themselves and the fact that some people receive multiple surveys may create some confusion, and Murphy said she appreciates hearing from fishermen who aren't sure that some questions apply to them.

"It's great when they call and explain why they won't respond," she said. "Some of the issues can be addressed in future rounds of the survey if we know what they are."

Murphy also understands that some fishermen don't return the surveys because of anger over the implementation of catch shares in the groundfish fishery and the recent cuts in allocations of some groundfish stocks.

"People have said, 'You're just too late. The fishery has already been destroyed,'" she said.

And, some fishermen have said they are worried the information they provide will be used against them, fearing that if they are making money, NMFS may feel it can restrict fishing even further.

"I tell them I'm not a decision-maker.

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–Tammy Murphy

I can't predict how regulations may change over time," she said. "But, I do think management decisions should be informed not only by biological data about the condition of the fisheries, but also by economic and social data about what's happening to the people in the fisheries."

She can assure them that the information individual fishermen provide will be kept confidential within the Social Sciences Branch.

And, she emphasized, without the data, regulators cannot get a clear picture of the fishing community.

The Social Sciences Branch has set up a toll-free survey hotline for the cost survey at 1-855-314-0779. Owners also can e-mail the researchers with their questions at <vesselsurvey@erf.com>. A similar hotline will be set up for the owners' survey later this summer.

Much more information on the surveys and other socio-economic studies is available at <www.nefsc.noaa.gov/read/socialsci/index.html>.

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